

On James Burnham's *The Machiavellians*

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James Burnham's *The Machiavellians*, written in 1943, is the least known and most important of his books. It is the most important because it contains a clear expression of his social philosophy of freedom. He also defends his belief in a pluralist society, in which power restrains power and "the right of public opposition to the rulers," whoever they are, is the heart of freedom and is sustained forever. Many of his critics and his admirers are unaware of the actual nature of James Burnham's commitment to freedom in a book whose very title seems to suggest something quite different.

After all, the very word *Machiavellian* in popular discourse has the connotation of political cunning, duplicity, and bad faith; and the great social thinkers of the past, Gaetano Mosca, Vilfredo Pareto, and Roberto Michels, whom Burnham classifies as Machiavellians, are conventionally more notable for their criticisms of the possibility of democracy than as protagonists of human freedom. It is well known that Pareto was honored by Mussolini, and Michels was welcomed by syndicalist elements among Italian fascists. In undertaking a vindication of Machiavelli and of the three great Italian social philosophers as protagonists of human freedom, James Burnham has offered a challenging reinterpretation of some accepted views in the history of ideas. It is certainly not decisive about the meaning of a doctrine or thinker that a political figure or movement seeks to exploit it or him for his or its own purposes. Not everyone who claims paternity for his views in Nietzsche, Marx, or Pareto is justified in doing so. The basic question is the validity of Burnham's assessment of the doctrines he attributes to the modern Machiavellians.

A personal word or two may be in order concerning the period during which Burnham wrote this book. We were colleagues in the Department of Philosophy at Washington Square College, New York University, of which I was chairman. Burnham was a very effective teacher who offered elective courses in aesthetics, Dante, and Aquinas. He was very familiar with Machiavelli's works. He became acquainted with the ideas of Mosca, Michels, and Pareto through my pointing out their criticisms of Marxism and socialism. During the late thirties when Burnham subscribed to the Marxist outlook, he was not impressed by their criticisms. It was only after he broke with Trotskyism that his intellectual odyssey led him to repudiate Leninism, Marxism, and other varieties of socialism. It was then that he carefully read the works of Mosca, Michels, and Pareto, accepted the basic validity of

their analyses, and interpreted them as a confirmation of his own nonutopian conception of a free society.

In referring to *The Machiavellians* as the most important of James Burnham's books, some readers may think I have erred because Burnham's public recognition began two years earlier, in 1941, with the publication of *The Managerial Revolution*. In that book, he argues that Marxism had misconceived the nature of the true revolution of our time and that the effective ruling class in all industrialized societies was the managers—the technologists, engineers, and bureaucrats—without whom no economy could function. Although he tried to assimilate his predictions about the existing and growing power of the managerial elite to the thesis of *The Machiavellians*, the two themes are logically independent of each other. Shortly before *The Managerial Revolution* was published, Stalin was shooting Soviet managers out of hand, and shortly thereafter Hitler's managers kowtowed to the wildest instructions of their ideological party mentors. The burden of the argument of *The Machiavellians* is that whatever group, class, or elite, including managers, exercises directing power in any society, institutional ways must be found to limit this authority in the interests of genuine freedom. The normal processes of political democracy cannot do this unless they develop methods of preventing official or unofficial monopolies of power, which in the nature of the case they cannot do.

Why not? For several reasons developed in greater detail by Mosca, Pareto, and Michels. Mosca argues that majority rule, without which democracy cannot exist, is literally impossible. In every society, regardless of its political form, an organized minority constitutes the actual ruling class. It rules by myths that unify society and facilitate the acquisition of the habits that keep the ruled in their accustomed grooves of behavior. In times of stress when the ruled see through the myths and become restive, the rulers fall back on fraud to retain their power. If the fraud is no longer accepted and resistance begins, the rulers resort to naked force. Pareto argues that if the ruled revolt and succeed in overthrowing their rulers, it is not the people who come to power but "the leaders" of the people—a new elite replacing an old elite. Revolutions in effect are a circulation of elites into and out of power. Pareto believed that Marx was right in emphasizing that there is a class struggle. He was wrong in believing it would ever end. As soon as the workers overthrow the capitalists, a new class, a new minority, whether of bureaucrats, intellectuals, commissars, or what not, come to

power and enjoy the privileges of power. In this sense the class struggle is sure to endure forever.

Michels emphasized that no mass movements can ever succeed without an organization. The very nature of an organization dictates that some have more authority than others, or else nothing gets done. Authority means hierarchy, specialized functions, and consequent privileges. All this is historically verifiable, and inescapable. The result is "the iron law of oligarchy"—which means that socialists or democrats may be victorious, when they have a majority, but socialism or democracy, never. Leaders must take over in order to satisfy the needs of the led, which they do in their own way, on their own terms, and guided by their own interests.

It follows from this that democracy as a form of self-government or a government in which the major decisions of government rest upon the freely given consent of a majority of the adult governed, or their representatives, is a myth. It is impossible. Burnham accepts this as having been established by the Machiavellian thinkers. But he refuses to surrender the term *democracy* to its enemies—to those who preface it with adjectives like *new*, *directed*, *higher*, *organized*, *workers*—all of which are semantic disguises for totalitarianism. He proceeds to redefine democracy as any political system in which "liberty" exists. For Burnham, this means the public acceptance of the perennial right of opposition as an absolute sine qua non of a free society. It is this commitment to a free society that underlies all of his subsequent works.

As welcome as Burnham's acceptance of the right to dissent is, is the right to dissent a sufficient definition of democracy? Prior to that, are the arguments of the Machiavellians compelling? Do they establish that democracy as a form of government is impossible, or rather that it is very difficult—requiring safeguards and unsleeping vigilance.

Even if we were to accept the contention that the rule of the majority is impossible and that in every society the actual rulers constitute a minority, this would not wipe out the profound differences between the various forms and expressions of minority rule. A governing elite that rules by guile rather than by brute force certainly is more humane and preferable. A rule by guile that depends on sophisticated arguments is certainly more tolerable than one based on corruption or fraud. An argument whose validity is judged by the uncoerced votes of a majority of the citizens—representing multiple interests—is more likely to reflect the common good than an argument whose validity is judged by a minority with special interests. As Burnham himself very properly points out: in the never ending struggle between warring elites and special interests, the possibility of voting for a legally recognized opposition means that important concessions must often be made by those presently in power to the populace that casts its votes. This makes far-reaching reforms possible.

The reiteration of the view that all forms of society are in effect dictatorships of a minority over a majority is likely to make citizens skeptical of the differences—differences even of life and death—among the possible

forms of society. There were those under the Weimar regime in Germany who, despite the extension of its democratic base, still protested the fact that it was a form of minority rule. They tended to overlook the dangers of another kind of minority rule that ruthlessly prohibited any expression of dissent. They were soon to experience first-hand the differences between the restrictions on freedom flowing from a lack of economic means or from the censorship of statements inciting violence, and those flowing from the headsman's axe.

In one sense, the allegation of the Machiavellians seems to amount to no more than the recognition that no group of human beings can do everything at once, that given the natural variation of talents and capacities some delegation of authority is inescapable. Take any small assembly of citizens who have come together to make decisions affecting the community—such as a New England town meeting in which there are no property qualifications except of residence and no discriminations based on race, sex, religion, or national origin. Every office is elective from selectman to road commissioner. Once these officials are elected, they serve until the next election is held. Meanwhile, they exercise their authorized power to make decisions whose nature and consequences affect the daily life of the inhabitants. After all, the meeting cannot be in continuous session day and night to decide the specific questions which the selectman or road commissioner faces—what road to patch or repair and when—about which many different answers may be made. So long as these officials are open to criticism and removable, who can reasonably contest the statement that the community is a self-governing democracy? It may be rhetorically flamboyant to speak of "the supremacy of the people" in situations of this sort, but the operational meaning of the phrase is transparent in this and similar contexts.

It is therefore legitimate to use the term *democratic* in referring to a government based upon the freely given consent of the governed, if we acknowledge that democracy, like freedom, is a matter of degree. An electorate based only on adult white males is less democratic than an electorate based on all adult males, which is less democratic than one based on all adults—men and women. The greater the opportunities for participation, the greater the opportunity for the expression of dissent, the greater the availability of relevant information, the greater the likelihood that inescapable delegation of authority will reflect the public's choice.

We can understand and appreciate the emphasis that James Burnham and the Machiavellian social philosophers give to the right of opposition. They are aware that there is always a tendency to restrict the specific freedoms of specific groups on behalf of some fundamental public or common good which is often arbitrarily and irresponsibly invoked. But it is just as undeniable that when we speak of freedom we mean not the right to do anything we please, but specific freedoms in the plural—to speak, assemble, publish, travel, buy and sell, or not to buy or sell, to work or not to work, to be secure in our persons, and an infinite variety of other liberties. Some of

these freedoms are more strategic or basic than others, in that their presence and operation are necessary conditions of others. It is also a fact that there are many freedoms that sometimes conflict—genuinely conflict. If democracy is defined primarily as the right of dissent, it becomes rationally impossible to resolve conflicts of freedom, because such resolution may require that one of the conflicting freedoms be temporarily restricted or suspended. The right to be secure from death by fire or flood may require the disregard of someone's right to property. Protecting our right to survive as a free people may be endangered by unrestricted freedom of speech or press. Because rights conflict, no one right can be considered absolute or inviolable. Who is to decide? To refuse to decide is to choose the option of anarchy—the tyranny of a thousand successive despots.

That is why it is necessary to conceive of democracy in a broader fashion than merely as the right of opposition, as essential as that right is. Indeed, if democracy is defined as a government based on freely given consent, it already presupposes recognition of the right to dissent, for where dissent is not tolerated, consent cannot be freely given. A democratic community is committed to removing obstacles to the expression of dissent. It resolves conflicts between rights by selecting the policy whose consequences strengthen the entire structure of freedoms on which democracy rests. Just as it is sometimes necessary to fast for a limited period in the name of health, so too is it sometimes necessary to abridge certain freedoms to ensure the survival of democracy. If anything can serve as an absolute, it is that reason or intelligence should be our guide in resolving conflicts of freedom. Unlike all other values, reason or intelligence is the judge of its own limitations. With the poet-philosopher's insight, Santayana reminds us: "It is not reason to be only wise."

It is necessary to make one further distinction between democratic government and good government. The two are not necessarily the same. One of the justifications of democratic government is that because most human beings are the best judges of their own interests and welfare, they are more likely to achieve what they regard as a good life through democratic government than by any other form of government. But the functioning of democracies is so often affected by manipulated passion, by abuse of the democratic process and mechanisms of government, that sometimes the partisans of democracy are tempted to give up in despair until they reflect on the available alternatives to democracy.

If we consider a democracy based on freely given consent as an ideal, it functions as a regulative ideal. In the nature of things and man, no ideal can be completely realized. There is no such thing as ideal or absolute health, absolute wisdom, absolute democracy, an absolutely honest man or an absolutely fat one. Ideals merely allow us to make distinctions of degree and to judge the direction of affairs toward what we regard as desirable. The degree of freedom we find among democratic states depends upon social and political organizations, types and kinds of education, tradition, and religion. To a considerable extent it also is determined by the human

willingness to struggle for it on many different fronts, to resist well-intentioned incursions against customary freedoms that are not justified by an intelligent analysis of alternatives.

In justice to James Burnham I cannot conclude without noting his belief that a science of politics, although very difficult, is possible. Its validity is indicated by the successful predictions that can be made by its use. His own brave efforts to make large-scale predictions of a specific nature miscarried both in *The Managerial Revolution* and *The Machiavellians*. They do not invalidate the effort in principle but reinforce the wisdom of approaching large issues with caution, and proclaiming conclusions with less certitude. Burnham accepts too uncritically from his Machiavellian teachers that the great masses of people cannot be educated to a point at which they can make use of what scientific knowledge we have of political affairs. At this point we reach positions that rest on generalizations that go beyond the evidence, and are more indicative of attitudes of faith or skepticism in the capacity of human beings to learn from their own and other's experiences. The answer may be in doubt but the better part of wisdom until the answer is in—if it ever can be declared in—is to promote educational courses, discussions, and debates on political affairs.

Over and above this continuous educational activity, which is evidence that freedom of opposition exists, advocates of democracy should propose institutional changes that will increase the numbers of citizens who have a stake in the existence, defense, and extension of the democratic process. The right of opposition or dissent is always a *sine qua non* of a democratic order, for in its absence we cannot meaningfully speak of freely given consent. But if the right of opposition is not combined with proposals designed to distribute social and economic power, so that existing power can be checked by countervailing power, the right of opposition may be seen as only an ineffectual exercise in self-expression. Theoretically, it is not inconceivable that a monopoly of power will tolerate, and even encourage, expressions of dissent so long as it has no effect on existing distributions of power. Therefore, unless concrete proposals are advanced to meet problems of great concern to the community, expressions of dissent may be interpreted merely as ritualistic avowals of dissatisfaction with the status quo. The status quo always leaves something to be desired and it can always be altered from different perspectives. That is why intelligent opposition is always more than an expression of mere dissent on the great affairs of public life; it must offer positive proposals. □

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